

THE LITERARY LANDSCAPE

Historical literary figures east of the Continental Divide

By Tami Haaland

I remember the day, many years ago, when my colleague at MSU Billings, Sue Hart, sorted through a stack of Christmas cards from “Papa” Hemingway. Sue is well known for her work as a literary historian in Montana, and I am grateful to her for introducing me to the fun of this kind of literary investigation.

Holding those cards and reading the handwritten notes piqued my curiosity. When I asked about Hemingway, Sue shared a variety of details, but among them was her research on his short story “The Gambler.” He wrote it in 1930 after a car accident near Billings landed him in St. Vincent’s Hospital.

His seven-week stay included an inventive surgery using kangaroo tendon to repair his injured arm. Equally interesting is the series of events at St. Vincent’s Hospital that paralleled those in “The Gambler,” a story that features a baseball-watching nun alongside Mexican and Russian men who are brought into the emergency room after a fight.

I started conducting investigations of my own soon after this initiation. Among the most interesting discoveries for me was a volume of poetry written by Robert Frost’s daughter, Marjorie. This thin, brightly colored volume tucked away in the Montana Room of Parmly Billings Library sent me in search of her story. Again, Sue provided details to get me started.

Marjorie married Willard Fraser, who was to become Billings’ beloved mayor of the 1960s and ’70s. Unfortunately, Marjorie died a few weeks after their daughter, Robin, was born. To find out more about Marjorie and her work, I investigated both Frost’s letters and the Frost family letters. They revealed the parents’ excitement about the marriage, their thrill at visiting Montana and their great sorrow at Marjorie’s painful decline and death. After a year or two passed, the letters reveal their decision to pub-

lish the book as well as ideas they considered and rejected during its preparation.

Because their grandchild grew up in Billings, the Frosts would occasionally visit and sometimes Robert Frost would read his poetry or lecture in the community. He gave the graduation address at Senior High School’s 1952 ceremony when Robin was among the graduates. There are also records of several presentations at Rocky Mountain College and full transcript of a talk given at Eastern Montana College (now MSU Billings) in 1952.

Many literary figures inhabited the eastern part of Montana, some better known than others. The four poets below lived in Montana during the early 20th century, either in their youth, or spending their adult years on the prairie.

J.V. Cunningham spent the formative years of his life in Billings before his family moved south to Denver. His “Montana Pastoral” details the effects of a harsh climate on the individual. From Denver he went to Stanford to study with modernist poet Yvor Winters.

Gwendolen Haste came to Billings as a teenager in the early twentieth century to assist her father in publishing his magazine, *The Scientific Farmer*. As part of their work, they visited farms and ranches, and based on some of her experiences, Haste wrote and published her most well-known poems, including “Ranch in the Coulee,” a portrait of a woman’s isolation on the prairie.

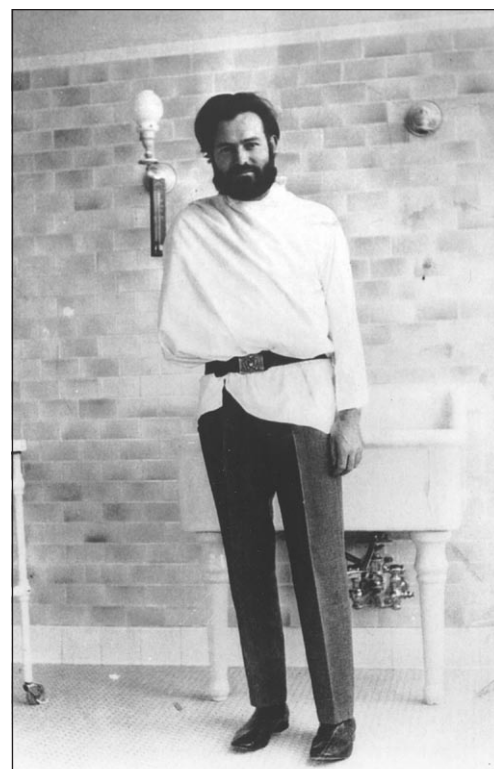
Grace Stone Coates lived in nearby Martinsdale and published both fiction and poetry. Her coming-of-age story, “Wild Plums,” features a young girl growing up in a rural community. John Updike thought so much of it that he chose “Wild Plums” as one of The Best American Short Stories of the Century. Coates is also well known for her editorial work alongside H. G. Merriam on *The Frontier*. Fortunately for us, Drumlummon has republished her poetry in *Food of God and Starvelings* (2007) and plans to make her previously unpublished novel, *Clear Title*, available soon.

Finally, I would like to mention Glendive’s Dorothe Bendon, whose volume of poetry

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Grace Stones Coates lived in Martinsdale and published both fiction and poetry. (Photo courtesy of Rick Newby and Drumlummon Institute)



In this photo from the *Billings Gazette*, writer Ernest Hemingway stands with his arm in a sling while being cared for at St. Vincent in the fall of 1930 after an accident.

(Photo courtesy of the Western Heritage Center)

entitled *Mirror Images* was published in 1931 when she was in her early twenties. The poems are sensuous and show significant talent, and I have been fascinated not only by her work but the forces that surround it.

On the one hand, the professor at Mills College who introduced her work scorned Bendon’s Montana background as “unpoetic.” On the other hand, H.G. Merriam wrote a scathing review in *The Frontier*, criticizing her work because she failed to focus more exclusively on Montana. He was especially critical of her mythological references, though Merriam, himself wrote poetry heavily laden with mythological themes. Bendon went on to become a scholar, and among her most well-known books is *The English Novel: Form and Function*.

Investigating the literary past of a given place has many rewards. Like family history, literary history is a gradual unfolding, a pursuit of one strand or another of possibilities over time. Just when it seems all of the information is clear, something else can turn up to deepen the story or throw everything onto another track.

We can see shadows of current patterns in the stories of the past. And, likewise, through this investigation communities might come to recognize that their literary present is soon to be their literary past, and individuals and groups might take up the enjoyable pursuit of mining this legacy for the gems it has to offer.

Web resources for writers

Every Writer’s Resource, www.everywritersresource.com: This website offers a listing of the top 50 literary magazines, as well as the top 50 online literary magazines. The abundant content also includes a list of book and magazine publishers, tips for students in university writing programs, suggestions on how to promote your writing, and print-on-demand resources.

Poets & Writers, www.pw.org: Considered by many to be the best source for poets and writers, this website offers features from the award-winning print edition, daily news items, advice from writers, and a popular blog about writing contests.

Going Somewhere?

Travel with the voices of the West

Reflections West: A five-minute foray into the literature of the West

Take a five-minute foray into the writing and culture of the West during “Reflections West.” Each week on public radio, hosts David Moore and Lisa Simon read compelling contributions about the West that have been thematically paired with a poignant passage of literature.

The season continues with the following pairings:

- Neil McMahon reflects on the role physical labor has played on the writing of the West. He pairs his thoughts with a poem by the late Ed Lahey, Oct. 30 and Nov. 1.
- Melissa Mylchreest reflects on the mythology of the American West, pairing it with her poem, “The Gap-tooth Girl,” Nov. 20 and 22.
- Clay Springmeyer reflects on unexpected dangers in peaceful places, and pairs it with a poem by Sheila Ruble, Nov. 27 and 29.
- Sandra Dal Poggetto reflects on the right tool for the art of birding, and pairs her thoughts with those of Annie Oakley, Dec. 4 and 6.
- UM professor Tobin Shearer reflects on race relations in the West. He pairs his thoughts with a poignant excerpt by Albert Raboteau, author of *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American History*, Dec. 11 and 13.
- Krys Holmes reflects on the human desire to leave a legacy, paired with a poem by her brother, Steve Garnaas-Holmes, Dec. 18 and 20.

Programs air at 8:30 p.m. Tuesdays on Montana Public Radio and 7:01 p.m. Thursdays on Yellowstone Public Radio, and are posted on the broadcast date at www.reflectionswest.org.

Reflections WEST.ORG